



House Select Committee on Homeland Security Democrats

JIM TURNER, Ranking Member

www.house.gov/hsc/democrats/

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 15, 2004

Contact: Moira Whelan
(202) 226-8827

Congressman Jim Turner, Ranking Member of the Select Committee on Homeland Security made the following statement at a hearing of the Full Committee on "Combating Terrorism: The Role of the Broadcast Media"

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

As we have said many times, this country confronts a new type of war. It is a war where the lives of the American public hang in the balance. It is a war that may depend on a well informed citizenry. Above all, this hearing is about how to educate and prepare the public.

There is little doubt that Americans are more familiar with the faces of the men and women in the press corps than they are the men and women fighting Al Qaeda at our borders and ports, and in the hallways of Washington. We welcome the media into our family rooms as trusted agents in delivering critical information to keep us safe.

The media's ability to broadcast the events of September 11 as they unfolded armed the passengers of Flight 93 with the information they needed to take action. Because these brave passengers knew what was happening in New York, they risked their lives to save others.

Americans joined together 3 years ago to watch in horror as the planes hit the Twin Towers and then the Pentagon. Men and women, trapped in the upper floors of the World Trade Center had access to information that the firefighters below lacked. Had the first responders, government officials, and media been able to quickly share information and communicate a clear message, perhaps more lives could have been saved.

Clearly, the media has a vital role to play in emergency response. To do it well requires planning, cooperation with government agencies, and a clear set of rules and guidelines. While some progress has been made, more work needs to be done.

Although personal responsibility must be part of the equation, Americans should be able to trust in what their government is communicating to them.

We can always do a better job of letting the public know what is going on. In addition, we all agree that the press plays an important role in making sure we have an honest public discourse about how this country is preparing itself to protect against another terrorist attack and how it is going about winning the war on terror.

Today, we get to turn the tables and Members get to ask the media – or its former members – the questions. In particular, I'd like your input on three areas that are critical to how

the war on terror is communicated to the public.

First, DHS's method of communicating the terrorist threat to the public, the Homeland Security Advisory System, still remains confusing. The color-coded system is not helping us secure the homeland, in part, because it has not been precise in educating our citizens and public officials about what they need to do in the face of a terrorist threat.

Our law enforcement, security, and emergency personnel---and the press-- don't need a color, they need the facts. I would like to know how helpful this system is to the media being able to do their job. Is it helpful, or does it distract us from the facts? Do you find that focusing on a color leads us to miss the bigger picture?

Second, we also need to do a better job of communicating our message around the world. The America that we know is not the one portrayed in the Muslim world on TV, on the Internet, and in the madrassahs.

We must devote more attention to public diplomacy to educate the international audience about the United States, to further explain our policies and improve our public image. I would like to know how you think it is best to go about this task.

Finally, we all understand that if we sacrifice the freedoms we have in this country, the terrorists win. We must preserve the transparency in government by allowing the media as much access to information as is allowable given national security concerns. In the Homeland Security Act, this Congress called for greater emphasis on sharing information with local and state first responders and with the public at large.

Yet it is my understanding that the Administration and DHS are planning actions that threaten to limit the ability of local officials to share information with the public, and to force them to sign nondisclosure agreements to receive essential terrorist threat information from the government. We cannot forget that in the post-9/11 world, sharing information, not withholding it, is what will protect us. I would like your views on this and on your interactions with the Department of Homeland Security.

We have a long way to go to making this country safer, including better ways to communicate with the public. I look forward to your input and thank you for your continued efforts in the war on terror.

###

